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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AFTER "IDEAS ELECTION", ANALYSTS URGE USG
TO ADVISE SAAD HARIRI

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Discussing the June 7 election results at a June 9 dinner hosted by the DCM, political analysts reached mixed conclusions on whether Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun "won or lost" the elections. While Aoun received a majority of Christian votes, he won by slimmer margins than in 2005, and his victories in certain districts depended on the Shia vote. The analysts concluded that Syria and Hizballah were comfortable with the election outcome.

Speaker Nabih Berri was most likely going to retain his position, they agreed, with one analyst suggesting March 14 parliamentarians should exact a price from the opposition for Berri's re-appointment. They believed it would take some time to form the next cabinet, but that it would resemble the current 30-member cabinet. One guest stressed that with the mandate it received, March 14 needed to "form a government and do something!!"

¶2. (C) Analysts were surprised by March 14's wide margin of victory and that voters chose full candidates' lists in all but one district, calling this an "ideas election" where people voted against March 8's platform rather than for or against individuals. The analysts suggested the U.S. help guide majority leader Saad Hariri, the likely next prime minister, into forging closer relations with President Sleiman and Aoun as the only way to counter Hizballah's influence. Discussion on Hizballah's weapons should remain outside of the government and with the National Dialogue, they concluded. End summary.

DID AOUN WIN OR LOSE?

¶3. (C) Political analysts Oussama Safa, Paul Salem, Michael Young, and Sam Gharizi attended a dinner hosted by the DCM on June 9 to discuss the election results. Ambassador, Pol/Econ Chief, and PolOff were also present. The guests had mixed opinions on whether Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun "won or lost" the June 7 vote. Young noted that Aoun received 58 percent of the Christian votes and will be controlling the largest Christian parliamentary bloc.

However, he said, Aoun's margins in each district were smaller than in 2005, and the Shia votes were a critical component to his victory, weakening his claim to being leader of the Christians. Several argued that Aoun had lost some Christian support because of his alliance with Hizballah.

¶4. (C) Salem expected Aoun to focus his energies on winning the 2010 municipality elections. Young predicted that Aoun, who "always needs a battle," would accelerate his attacks against President Sleiman. He argued that Sleiman, a Christian, should be "more Maronite than Aoun," or else he will be "completely marginalized" by Aoun in the contest for leadership of the Christians in Lebanon.

WHAT IRAN, SYRIA AND ISRAEL WANTED

¶5. (C) Salem said that Syria preferred a March 14 victory to help its burgeoning relationship with the U.S.; otherwise it would face accusations from the U.S. that it interfered in the elections. Young posited that while Hizballah did not want to lose, it is "comfortable" as part of the opposition. Salem wondered if Israel had preferred a March 8 victory so that it could argue to the U.S. that Lebanon could not be trusted, reducing U.S. pressure on Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

¶6. (C) The "Iranian" candidates won, and the pro-Syrians lost, Young assessed. He explained that those who were likely to join a pro-Syrian coalition after the elections, namely Berri and March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, were

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"defeated" in the sense that their candidates lost or won by slim margins. Conversely, Young said, the "Iranian" candidates, Hizballah and, by extension, Aoun, were victorious. Jumblatt was unhappy because his candidate in Baabda lost, a sign Jumblatt's outreach to Speaker Nabih Berri and Hizballah was unsuccessful.

"POLITICALLY UNDRESSING BERRI;"
NEXT STEPS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

¶7. (C) The analysts discussed next steps. Everyone agreed that Berri would retain his position as Speaker. However, Salem suggested that Hizballah would "undress him politically" (i.e. exact some costs) before bringing him back as Speaker. Young suggested that March 14 seek some leverage by nominating someone other than Berri to confront the opposition. March 14 should use the position as a bargaining chip, ultimately accepting Berri, but not conceding the position without a cost.

¶8. (C) All agreed it would take some time to form a cabinet, which likely would have 30 ministers, with the President nominating at least the Interior and Defense ministers. They also agreed that Saad Hariri would become the next PM (Saad told the Ambassador this himself in a June 8 meeting, septel).

¶9. (C) Salem insisted that March 14, under Saad's leadership, develop a program with policies. Given the strong mandate it received, March 14 needed to "form a government and do something!!"

WHAT THE U.S. SHOULD DO NOW

¶10. (C) Though the election results "validate all of the support the U.S. has given Lebanon," the U.S. should refrain from gloating, the interlocutors advised. Safa proposed the U.S. encourage closer cooperation between Saad and Sleiman, similar to the cooperation between current PM Fouad Siniora and the President. The U.S. should also urge Saad to extend a hand to Aoun, Safa recommended.

¶11. (C) The experts disagreed on next steps regarding Hizballah's arms. Safa and Salem believed March 14 should not "antagonize" Hizballah on its weapons. Concurring, Gharizi argued that this was a topic for the National Dialogue, not the government. Young dissented, arguing that March 14 has a mandate to rule, and the election reflected the Lebanese stance moving away from supporting Hizballah's weapons.

¶12. (C) Referring to President Obama's Cairo speech to the Muslim world three days before the election, Safa posited that the undecided voters may have concluded that "It is no longer a bad thing to be on the Americans' side." Young added that voters could have perceived the speech as a further opening to Iran, in addition to President Obama's Nawruz message, motivating voters to support the pro-U.S. March 14 alliance.

SURPRISE AT VOTERS
CHOOSING FULL LISTS

¶13. (C) Young and Salem said they were surprised that extent to which people voted for full lists. Calling June 7 an "ideas election" where people voted against March 8's platform, Young recounted that it was rare in Lebanon's electoral history for voters to vote full lists over persons they know.

¶14. (C) Zahle was the perfect example, Young said, noting that people voted against longtime local favorite Elie Skaff because they felt he "was being pushed around by Syria."

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Similarly, Young continued, Telecommunications Minister (and Aoun's son-in-law) Gebran Bassil lost because people cast their vote against Iranian interference he represented. Young said Bassil, from modest means, had been buying a lot of property in his home district over the last year and a half, and people interpreted this to mean Bassil was receiving money from Iran. IFES Director Richard Chambers, during a post-election briefing sponsored by Carnegie Endowment earlier in the day, argued that the "mono-bloc" voting led to disproportionate results because March 8 received a larger number of votes, but March 14 won more districts. .

SISON